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2019-10

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Linden , C-G , Hujanen , J & Lehtisaari , K 2019 , ' Hyperlocal Media in the Nordic Region : Introduction ' , NORDICOM Review , vol. 40 , no. s2 , pp. 3-13 . <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2019-0024>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/306965>  
<https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2019-0024>

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## Introduction

# Hyperlocal Media in the Nordic Region

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As guest editors, we welcome readers to this special issue of *Nordicom Review* – “Hyperlocal media in the Nordic region”. The edition deals with emerging forms of local media and journalism. Research into journalism and media has long neglected new types of local media and communication (Aldridge, 2007; Nielsen, 2015). However, during recent years, a reorientation among researchers can be seen, including an interest in exploring hyperlocal initiatives such as community websites and online news start-ups (Nygren et al., 2018; Waschková Císařová, 2017; Williams et al., 2015). The growing interest in local journalism among researchers is often accompanied by a sense of urgency, the feeling of approaching “an object of study in danger of extinction” and the “desire to contribute to its survival” (Guimerà et al., 2018).

Scholarly inquiry into new, hyperlocal, forms of local media is of great relevance, as traditional forms of local media and journalism are going through a phase of major transformation and challenges. Local journalism and media are vital for local communities, performing a public service and providing a public good for people living in there. As Nielsen states (2015), local media have functioned as “keystone media” through which people have received most of their local news.

What are journalists providing for communities? According to Brian McNair (2009), journalists have four normative functions: 1) to provide sources of information, 2) to act as watchdogs, 3) to serve as mediators or representatives of citizens and 4) to advocate specific political solutions and campaigns in the name of the public. At the same time, these tasks are often the source of criticism of journalists not living up to their ideals or abusing their power. However, these are four important functions that support deliberative democracy, providing transparency and guidance, a specific form of sense-making service (Deuze, 2008).

The withdrawal of professional news media from local communities, where they should serve so-called “critical information needs”, has become a problem in various

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Lindén, C.-G., Hujanen, J. & Lehtisaari, K. (2019). Introduction: Hyperlocal media in the Nordic region. *Nordicom Review*, 40 (Special Issue 2): 3–13. doi:10.2478/nor-2019-0024.

parts of the world (Napoli et al., 2018; Nygren & Althén, 2014; Ramsay & Moore, 2016). This development can have serious implications for local life and democracy. In the United States, several studies explore what the lack of reporters in the community can mean in terms of limiting the creation and sharing of local knowledge. The impact is profound and somewhat surprising. For instance, following newspaper closures, municipal borrowing costs have increased (Gao et al., 2018), political polarisation has grown (Darr et al., 2018) and public officials have felt under less pressure to be accountable (Snyder Jr & Strömberg, 2010). This small sample of studies shows that even though professional journalists do not always live up to their ideals, as described by McNair (2009), the mere presence of reporters and their potential for scrutinising power has a deterrent effect.

The problem is not confined just to the United States. In early 2019, the European Committee of Ministers expressed their concern that community and other types of media serving local and rural communities do not have the resources needed to operate on all distribution platforms (Council of Europe, 2019). Accordingly, an increasingly topical question for research in this area is whether hyperlocal initiatives are able to provide new and relevant information for communities where local journalism produced by professional news media and journalists is in decline, or lacking. Increased attention to hyperlocal news can be seen among media and policy practitioners as well as decision makers, and is being underlined by the campaigns of practitioners (Williams et al., 2015). Such critical issues regarding the importance and future of local media and journalism set the stage for this special issue of *Nordicom Review*.

## What is hyperlocal media?

The articles in this special issue subscribe to a large extent to the concept of hyperlocal media operations presented by Metzgar and colleagues (2011) – that is, hyperlocals are characterised by distinct geographical boundaries and by original content that focuses on the local community. While hyperlocal publishing is often defined as existing in the digital realm, it is also possible to find emerging types of hyperlocal media in print form, as noted by Harte and colleagues (2016) and Leckner and colleagues (2017) as well as by Hujanen and colleagues in this issue. The emergence of a start-up culture in the field of journalism is a global trend (Wagemans et al., 2016). Hyperlocal media can be distinguished from so-called digital-born news sites, although some definitions of hyperlocal publications include these as well (Nicholls et al., 2018).

Metzgar and colleagues underline the need to define a new phenomenon correctly, but as Guimerà and colleagues (2018) note, the definition should feed on “previous traditions and also contemporary experiences”. In essence, this means building upon an existing understanding of the functions of media by combining them with new features, for instance technological affordances or business opportunities. These will be described in the following sections.

Early on in the editorial process, we recognised the complexity of various aspects of hyperlocal media and decided not to be limited by orthodox and strict definitions. This approach reflects the freshness of the research area and the need for an open approach. The literature on hyperlocal media goes back some 15 years and is thus a relatively new field of study in the Nordic context (Boyles, 2006; Farhi, 2007; Shaw, 2007). The con-

cept of hyperlocal media has provided researchers with a bridge from citizen journalism, community media and localised websites in legacy media to alternative hybrid forms of media work, including participatory forms of publishing. There is a long history of research into community media and their role in the context of developing countries especially, but also among ethnic groups and minorities (Berrigan, 1979; Deuze, 2006). In the early 2000s, hyperlocal media largely took over the expression “community media” in the discussion of new forms of media focussing on the information needs of the local population and the role they play as a “glue” that holds communities together (Baines, 2010, 2012).

## **The role of technology**

To add more context to this special issue, we note that digital technology plays an important role in the development of the hyperlocal sector beyond websites to distribution over mobile phones (Harte et al., 2018). Hyperlocal media can thus be seen as part of the rise of location-based services (LBS), driven by the emergence of communication geotechnologies.

The use of LBS enables content and services to be based on the user’s geographical location such as restaurants, bars and cafés (Gruteser & Grunwald, 2003; Küpper, 2005; Schiller & Voisard, 2004). Mobility and location awareness – “locative media” – are pervasive and foundational affordances of contemporary communication systems; a mobile phone is after all the main device for staying informed (Erdal et al., 2019). Most owners of smartphones say they use LBS (Zickuhr, 2013). The use of LBS in social media applications on smartphones has enabled people to share their activities and create spatial identities (Hasan et al., 2013; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015).

Place-based knowledge connecting information to geographic space is also important to journalism practice, news producers, consumers and the news experience (Gutsche Jr & Hess, 2018; Schmitz Weiss, 2015). Due to the ubiquity of geotechnology, media companies are increasingly trying to match content with people in the right context, be it activity, time or proximity. “Location, locality, and localism” have traditionally been key characteristics of news. Now they are enhanced by the context-awareness capabilities of mobile media (Goggin et al., 2015; Oppegaard & Rabby, 2016). However, media companies have been slow to understand how to configure their organisational and technical systems to take advantage of these opportunities (Rau & Ehlers, 2018). This shortcoming creates an open space for actors outside traditional media, for example in hyperlocal media. The financial aspects of the hyperlocal trend should also not be underestimated. Smartphones and social media provide cheap and accessible means for producing and distributing content geotagged for people living in specific locations (Gutsche Jr & Hess, 2018).

## **Why the Nordic countries?**

In this special issue we focus on the global North, where the hyperlocal is a rapidly developing form of local media and information sharing as well as a field of research. At first glance, Nordic countries seem to provide a singular institutional setting. In other words, despite differences in media systems and media policies, there seems to be a

Nordic media model with common features with regard to patterns of how journalism cultures, media policy, media markets and media use are connected (Brüggemann et al., 2014: 1038). Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) put forward the concept of a “Nordic media welfare state”, which they believe is supported by four pillars: universal services, editorial freedom, a cultural policy for the media and a tendency to choose policy solutions that are consensual and durable, based on consultation with both public and private stakeholders. One characteristic is the decentralised structure of the media system, with a mix of public service broadcasting and commercial newspapers.

However, the media landscape is not stable even in the Nordic countries. Although the patterns of development in newspaper publishing differ, the circulation of printed editions in Nordic countries has been in decline in the 2000s (Lehtisaari et al., 2017). For example, in Finland, 34 publications exited the market between 2000 and 2010, while only three entered it (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018). After more careful examination, the Nordic countries present distinct differences between one another. Denmark has a strong tradition of free newspapers, while citizens in Norway, Sweden and Finland are accustomed to paying for news through subscribed newspapers. The spending on advertising per capita is much smaller in Finland than in the rest of the Nordic region and the country has no direct subsidies for the press (Lehtisaari et al., 2017).

In light of these differences, we believe that comparing recent developments in the local media sphere in separate parts of the Nordic region offers new, detailed insights into how the Nordic media market is changing. To highlight the importance of comparative studies, we lean on Strömbäck and colleagues (2008) who present five dimensions of comparative research: 1) an observation is insignificant without comparison, 2) comparative research contributes to an expansion of the empirical database, 3) comparative research is an antidote to naïve universalism, 4) comparative research helps us understand other systems and our own systems, and 5) comparative research renders the invisible visible, that is by bringing to attention features that were taken for granted. We nevertheless recognise that comparative studies may be prone to ethnocentrism.

## Themes in this issue

This issue of *Nordicom Review* presents a selection of eight articles, reflecting the diversity of the research field while at the same time dealing with common issues. The articles discuss four main themes: 1) the emergence of new forms of local media and information production, 2) hyperlocals as business (i.e. hyperlocal business ecosystems, entrepreneurial processes and peripheral actors), 3) news coverage of local communities without the presence of professional local journalists and 4) local media ecology from the media user perspective. The issue contains empirical analysis and case studies as well as more theoretical considerations. Besides examining hyperlocal media from Finland, Norway and Sweden, the issue includes a comparative wider European perspective.

### *Compensating for the decline of local journalism?*

One of the topical themes presented in this special issue, as was briefly introduced at the beginning of this article, is the matter of local news coverage in cases where there are no professional local journalists. Can hyperlocal media compensate for the decline of

local journalism? The answer is yes and no. As Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe discuss, we firstly need to find out what geographical space hyperlocal journalism is to fill. Their study shows that there is less original journalistic coverage and there are fewer community stories in Swedish municipalities where there are no journalists, compared to municipalities that have editorial offices. Institutional sources play a more important role in places without traditional media. After having analysed several hundred stories, Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe conclude that news coverage in locations without journalists is more likely to be about crime and less likely to include community news.

In these locations, the need for information, as Nygren explores in his contribution, can be met by updates distributed on social media, mainly via Facebook and Instagram. In Sweden, newspapers still produce most of the original news reporting, with public service and hyperlocal publications complementing rather than replacing them. However, Facebook is currently taking the central position in local media ecologies. Certainly, this qualitative change is an area that will need more research in the future, but because of privacy issues researchers no longer have direct access to data regarding user profiles (Kelly, 2019).

The lack of journalists in certain areas and shrinking local media coverage are issues that relate ultimately to the functioning of democracy. Jangdal, in her article, considers whether new hyperlocal initiatives contribute to democracy, using Sweden as her context. The central questions her article poses are whether hyperlocal media have the necessary structures in place to facilitate a democratic dialogue and how hyperlocal media operators regard the importance of democracy. Some previous studies (Baines, 2012; Harte et al., 2016; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams et al., 2015) indicate that hyperlocal media can play an important democratic role (for instance, by enhancing active civic participation, helping people root themselves in the local community, providing the geographic location with meaning and holding local power to account). However, Jangdal's study shows that despite their ambitions the ability of hyperlocals to play a strong democratic role varies. The fact that new hyperlocal publications have not emerged in media-absent rural areas can be just one of the many problems facing local democracy. As the absence of reliable media opens the gates for non-serious information providers, Jangdal's advice is that governments need seriously to consider how to support the supply of verified information.

### *Emergence of new forms of publication*

As has been mentioned, one of the main themes of this special issue is the emergence of hyperlocal initiatives in the Nordic region (i.e. the extent and characteristics of Nordic hyperlocal media and how they relate to wider changes in respective media ecosystems). New forms of local publishing can exist in an environment where legacy media still have a relatively strong position. One example of this is Finland. In their article, Hujanen and colleagues examine how local media ecosystems are evolving there. The authors build upon a previous categorisation by Picard (2003) to explore whether the current phase might be seen as the start of a "fifth media era" in the country (without disruptive features or a clean break with the past). What seems to be specific to the Finnish context is the high number of associations that act as publishers (almost one half). Outside social media, new forms of hyperlocal media have developed at a rather leisurely pace.

In order to obtain up-to-date insights into the media ecosystem, the main issues they examine are the extent to which hyperlocal media are introduced, how the hyperlocal initiatives can be characterised and how they contribute to and reflect changes in the wider Finnish media ecosystem.

Halvorsen and Bjerke examine the emergence of hyperlocal media in Norway and discuss their findings in relation to the structure of existing print-based local newspapers. Their article also illuminates the circumstances and strategies behind successful start-ups of new hyperlocal newspapers.

The role of public actors and organisations within the hyperlocal field is also examined in this issue. Grafström and Rehnberg explore a recent feature of the Swedish local media ecosystem: the emergence of public organisations as news producers in their own right. Their study shows how a county council in western Sweden is bypassing traditional media with its own brand, which is promoted as an “independent editorial office of civil servants”. This detailed study adds to previous research in Sweden on strategies adopted by municipalities to compensate for the disappearance of legacy media and the spread of so-called news deserts (Nygren & Leckner, 2017). A core issue is the balancing act of providing critical information to citizens on the one hand and of branding places on the other. A question that might be asked is what happens when crucial information that could harm the “brand” is to be released, for instance, when it concerns misconduct by local representatives. With branding practices, municipalities compete for residents, business ventures, tourists and skilled workers (Wæraas et al., 2015). This seems to be the master framework within which the municipalities operate. The content analysis by Grafström and Rehnberg reveals that the municipalities offer content with a mainly positive spin: only six per cent of the articles on the examined web pages were framed in an entirely negative way. This fact is reflected in research showing that public organisations often face an uphill struggle in trying to connect with local citizens if their communication is not considered authentic, or if it only works one way (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2018; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

Furthermore, this suggests that there is a need for independently verified information, sourced and presented using journalistic methods. However, hyperlocal entrepreneurs are not necessarily looking for “gaps to fill” and are more often located in places where traditional media already exist (Jangdal in this issue; Nygren et al., 2018; Williams & Harte, 2016).

### *Hyperlocals as a business – or not*

In addition to discussing the operational landscape and new actors, several articles focus on hyperlocal publishing as a business, paying special attention to hyperlocal business ecosystems and entrepreneurial processes. An important question here is by what measures can hyperlocal media become economically successful. The article by Cooke and Bakker provides a comparative European perspective and explores in detail how 35 hyperlocals from five countries – the UK, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Sweden – organise their business and generate revenue streams. Cooke and Bakker show that the hyperlocal business ecosystem can take many forms and that revenue diversification represents a trend towards more sustainable economic models. Their conceptual framework of viable, sustainable and resilient models leads to a key finding,



namely that ecosystemic business relationships can help sustain hyperlocal journalism. Without a network of interdependent stakeholders, such as advertisers, there is much less potential to build a viable, sustainable and resilient business model.

Norway, with its established public system for press support, seems like a special case for hyperlocal publishing as a business. This is illustrated in the article by Halvorsen and Bjerke, who use a market approach when studying the Norwegian local media scene. They show that financial conditions make it possible to create a viable business model for hyperlocal online news media. The costs of building editorial processes might be high, however, which means primarily that an entrepreneur may have to survive without any income for a long period.

The Norwegian case indicates that state support may be crucial for viable hyperlocal publishing. Entrepreneurs still have to struggle with little or no income, but subsidies help them scale their operations and employ journalists to build more appealing content. In Sweden, a similar support system is in place that helps publishers when they manage to acquire 1,500 subscribers. This press support system has, however, been criticised for being inadequate (e.g. Ala-Fossi et al., 2018; SOU, 2016: 80). For instance, ETC magazine founded 15 local newspapers with the aim of reaching the level needed for financial support, but it failed to do so, and they were all closed down in late 2017 (Kihlström, 2017).

These state support systems stand in contrast to Finland, for instance, where there is neither state support nor are there any widespread sustainable hyperlocal business models. Instead, Finland is a special case where a number of committed enthusiasts are organised in associations to produce and/or share local content. Concerns over financial sustainability lead us to the question of what motivates hyperlocal media entrepreneurs. Tenor, in her article, argues that the passion of individuals plays an important role. This is an almost non-existent topic in research on media and journalism, where discussions about emotions tend to be absent. (For recent research on emotions, see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018 and Deuze & Prenger, 2018.) Her findings also show that hyperlocal media entrepreneurs are more concerned with what impact they have on society than on how well their companies fare commercially. These results are in line with the findings on Finnish hyperlocal publications. In the survey by Hujanen and colleagues four out of five of the hyperlocal publications included in the sample stated that they did not have any business ambitions. However, this finding needs to be interpreted in a context in which most of the production teams comprise amateurs or “enthusiasts”.

## Conclusion

In this special issue of *Nordicom Review*, “Hyperlocal media in the Nordic region”, we present eight articles that provide substantial contributions to this field of research. These contributions cover four main, somewhat overlapping, themes: 1) the emergence of new forms of local media and information producing, 2) hyperlocals as business, 3) news coverage of local communities without the presence of professional local journalists and 4) local media ecology from the media user perspective.

Can the decline in local news be countered by hyperlocal media? In the Nordic countries the approaches seem to differ from one country to another. The paper by Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe shows what kind of news stories decrease and increase when jour-



nalists disappear. Jangdal's study shows that new forms of media emerge primarily where journalism is already present, so they are not filling any obvious gaps. What we do know is that context matters, for instance when it comes to financial support. What is needed is additional research focusing on where and how citizens in local media ecosystems that have fewer resources satisfy their need for critical information. From Williams and colleagues (2015) we know that hyperlocal publications might be able to compensate for some gaps, but the supply of verified information should not be taken for granted.

Now we return to the financial issues. One important observation is that state support for media differs in these countries, heavily affecting local publishing. It may be argued that in Finland, where there is no financial support except for one EU-supported hyperlocal initiative identified in the mapping process, there are small possibilities for sustainable hyperlocal business models. In Norway and Sweden, journalism start-ups are working hard to pass the threshold where they are entitled to financial support.

This special issue also shows how the definition of hyperlocal media can be applied in different ways. Halvorsen and Bjerke consider "local online news sites that are indigenous to the web", while others, for instance Hajunen and colleagues, refer to "in-between" publications. Moving forward from the well-established definition by Metzgar and colleagues we see a need to discuss further technological affordances and the meaning of "spatial" or "locative" media and journalism in the context of hyperlocals (Erdal et al., 2019; Øie, 2013). Underlining the ubiquity of location-aware smartphones in the consumption of content, we would like to pose the question of whether hyperlocal media could be contextualised as part of LBS (Gruteser & Grunwald, 2003; Küpper, 2005; Rau & Ehlers, 2018; Schiller & Voisard, 2004). This would firstly necessitate the conceptualisation of journalism as a service (Eide & Knight, 1999; Ferrucci, 2015; Tremayne et al., 2007) and the underlining of the key functions of journalism: sense-making, scrutiny and advocacy as-a-service (Deuze, 2008; McNair, 2009). This would then allow us to relate the notion of hyperlocal media to other forms of local services aimed at, for instance, keeping citizens informed about ongoing community development and events not necessarily related to journalism. The benefit of this is clear: hyperlocal media would not be discussed in isolation or as a new form of journalism, but rather in terms of the nature and value of the services they offer (for instance, serving communities with verified information and providing other forms of information not traditionally connected to journalism). Such an endeavour would also allow us to link the content produced by journalists to social media, especially Facebook groups, which play an increasingly important role in local communication (see Gutsche Jr & Hess, 2018 and Nygren in this issue). That media ecosystems are in a state of flux and "hybridity" (Chadwick, 2017) implies that it has become increasingly difficult to define journalism (Deuze, 2008).

Against this background, it might be helpful to examine (news oriented) hyperlocal media in the context of LBS, where they cater to the perceived information needs of citizens and support local media ecosystems that are characterised by rapid transformation. In cases where the logic of hyperlocal media operations is based on journalistic practices such as the verification of information and truth-based knowledge, the added value of those services is in its combination of three elements: sense-making, scrutiny and advocacy-as-a-service.

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## Acknowledgements

This special issue was originally conceived in 2017 for the purposes of collecting and processing proceedings from the research conference Nordmedia in August 2017 in Tampere, Finland, with Jaana Hujanen and Gunnar Nygren as co-chairs. That special session helped us define common topics and determine the direction for a publication that would accommodate our different views. We would like to thank the authors for their contributions and our 15 anonymous reviewers across Europe. We would also like to thank Jonas Ohlsson, Johannes Bjerling and Karin Zelano at Nordicom in Gothenburg for accepting our proposal for a special issue and for firmly guiding us through their editorial practices.

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